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SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ FEBRUARY/MARCH 2007

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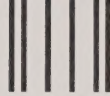
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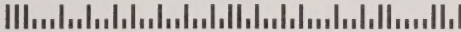
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Cover photo by Tommy Martin

Eyes of Faith



Recently, I received a gift of *Peace Planet*, a beautiful, reflective little book by Nan Merrill and Barbara Taylor. The first page, titled "Afghanistan," bears the image of an Afghan woman, dressed in the traditional Hijab and Niqab, her lovely dark eyes the only visible part of her body. The text reads, "We are all One in the Heart of Love. The divine spark can be seen in the eyes of all we meet." In an instant I was reminded that there is a Presence and a Power that transcends the cultural trappings that divide us. It was the second time in a month I had been invited beyond the comfortable familiarity of my Western world. In early December, I had the privilege of attending a presentation on Peace in Islam, touring the mosque at the Islamic Society of Central Jersey, breaking bread with their membership and joining them for Evening Prayer. My most vivid recollection of that experience is looking into the face of the woman who first welcomed me—the warmth and openness reflected in her eyes and her smile, the gentleness in her voice, her eagerness to reach out and draw me in. I had the immediate sense we were a great deal more similar than different. Perhaps, this does not

seem to be any grand insight but it was a markedly significant encounter for me because while I intellectually know better than to stereotype people, my heart had erected a protective barrier against the Moslem community because my husband had been literally moments away from being in one of the Twin Towers the day they were attacked. Post 9/11, I found myself stepping a little wider around a woman wearing a burq'a on the streets of Philadelphia or New York, wondering about the affiliations of a Middle Eastern man sharing an elevator with me. In retrospect, I simply forgot to look into their eyes! It is a simple truth—that “we are all One in the Heart of Love”—a valuable reminder that “the divine spark can be seen in the eyes of all we meet.” Of course, we have to remember to look!

You might like to know that here at Fellowship in Prayer we have undergone a physical transformation of our space with a fresh coat of paint and new carpeting throughout our house. It is a soft shade of green and a sign of hope for our future. On January 4th, we welcomed many of our friends for an Open House—if you are ever in the Princeton area and can stop by, we would love to see you and the “divine spark” you are! Meanwhile, your prayers, your creative ideas and any other ways you can support us in fulfilling our mission are greatly appreciated.

Peace Planet: Light for Our World, by Nan Merrill and Barbara Taylor, is published by Friends of Silence, 2006, 11 Cardiff Lane, Hannibal, MO 63401, 573-406-0646, www.peaceandprayergifts.com.

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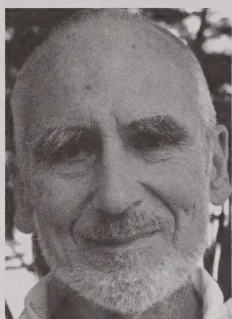




Louise A. Hutner

OUR FEATURE

An Interview with Brother David Steindl-Rast



"In the midst of a pragmatic world in which we constantly ask ourselves how useful things—and even people—are, Brother David calls us to "useless" praise. In the midst of a world in which hatred, strife, violence, and war dominate our consciousness, Brother David points our eyes in another direction and tells us that joy and peace are closer at hand than we might realize. In the midst of a world in which fear, apprehension, and suspicion make us live stingy, narrow, and small lives, Brother David stretches out his arms, smiles, and says, "Love wholeheartedly, be surprised, give thanks and praise—then you will discover the fullness of your life."

~ Henri Nouwen

David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., was born July 12, 1926, in Vienna, Austria, where he studied art, anthropology, and psychology, receiving an M.A. from the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts and a Ph.D. from the University of Vienna. In 1952 he followed his family in emigration to the United States. In 1953 he joined a newly-founded Benedictine community in Elmira, New York, Mount

Saviour Monastery, of which he is now a senior member. In 1958-59 Brother David was a post-doctoral fellow at Cornell University where he became the first Roman Catholic to hold the Thorpe Lectureship, following Bishop J.D.R. Robinson and Paul Tillich.

After twelve years of monastic training and studies in philosophy and theology, Brother David was sent by his abbot to participate in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, for which he received Vatican approval in 1967. His Zen teachers were Hakkuun Yasutani Roshi, Soen Nakagawa Roshi, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, and Eido Shimano Roshi. He co-founded the Center for Spiritual Studies in 1968 and received the 1975 Martin Buber Award for his achievements in building bridges between religious traditions.

Together with Thomas Merton, Brother David helped launch a renewal of religious life. From 1970 on, he became a leading figure in the House of Prayer movement, which affected some 200,000 members of religious orders in the United States and Canada.

For decades, Brother David has divided his time between living a hermit's life, and touring extensively to deliver lectures on five continents. His audiences have ranged from starving students in Zaire to faculty at Harvard and Columbia Universities, Buddhist monks, Sufi retreatants, Papago Indians, German intellectuals, and gatherings at the United Nations. Brother David has brought spiritual depth to the lives of countless people whom he touches through his lectures, workshops, and writings.

He has contributed to a wide range of books and periodicals, from the Encyclopedia Americana and The New Catholic Encyclopedia, to the New Age Journal and Parabola Magazine. His books have been translated into many languages. Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer and

A Listening Heart have been reprinted and anthologized for more than two decades. Brother David co-authored Belonging to the Universe (winner of the 1992 American Book Award), a dialogue on new paradigm thinking in science and theology with physicist, Fritjof Capra. His dialogue with Buddhists produced The Ground We Share: Buddhist and Christian Practice, co-authored with Robert Aitken Roshi. His most recent books are The Music of Silence, co-written with Sharon Lebell, and Words of Common Sense.

*At present, Brother David serves a worldwide Network for Grateful Living through an interactive website at www.gratefulness.org, with several thousand participants daily from more than 235 countries. This international, non-profit organization is member-supported. Their vision is "a world-wide community dedicated to gratefulness as the core inspiration for personal change, international cooperation, and sustainable activism in areas of universal concern." ANG*L (their acronym) provides resources for "living in the gentle power of gratefulness, which restores courage, reconciles relationships, and heals our earth."*

We encourage you to visit this web site often and to find spiritual enrichment and support from the many features it offers. You'll find a wealth of articles by Brother David; you'll also find a section titled "What's New" with brief summaries of good news from around the world; and you'll be invited to light a "virtual" candle on their unique "Light a Candle" page described as follows:

"In many different traditions lighting candles is a sacred action. It expresses more than words can express. It has to do with gratefulness. From time immemorial, people have lit candles in sacred places. Why should cyberspace not be sacred?"

Brother David has been a friend of SACRED JOURNEY for many years. He graciously agreed to do this interview with Louise Hutner during the holy period of Christmas just past, and on the eve of two weeks of travel, first to California and then to Rome. She is deeply grateful for his generosity.

Louise Hutner: What inspired you to study with a Zen teacher and how has that enriched your life as a Christian?

Brother David: As a young monk, I was often sent to lecture at various universities about monastic life. At this time, the first Buddhist monks were popping up in this country, so I felt that intellectual honesty demanded that I check out whether the word monk was really applied in the same sense to both Buddhist and Christian monks. An encounter with a young Zen monk—now Eido Shimano Roshi—provided this opportunity and convinced me that monastic life is a basic human option which we live out according to the framework offered by our culture, be it, for instance, Christian or Buddhist. Its essence is mindful living in an environment—the monastery—in which every detail facilitates mindful living.

Contact with admirable Buddhist monks has encouraged me in my own monastic life. But beyond that, Buddhist philosophy provides a framework in which it is in some respects easier to speak about Christian mystical experience than in traditional western terms. When I asked Thomas Merton whether his studies of Buddhist philosophy had allowed him to express his Christian theology in a way which so many

of his readers find helpful, he gave a good deal of thought to my question and then answered it with a clear-cut "Yes."

You have said in the past that you feel perfectly at home in a Zen monastery, as much as you feel at home in your own monastery. What is it that underlies these two faith traditions, and perhaps others as well, that allows you to fit so comfortably into a seemingly quite different faith tradition?

What I have said above explains why I feel so at home in a Zen monastery. Of course, symbols, rituals, and theological concepts differ widely in the two traditions, and give their monastic expression its uniqueness. That one and the same descent into Stillness can make the two traditions bring up such different pearls from that ocean depth fills me with ever-new wonder.

You're often referred to as Thomas Merton's successor in the contemplative Christian tradition, and I understand that he was a powerful influence in your life. I've read, from your "Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West", that you found "many points of contact with Zen Buddhist teaching in all this." You quote Merton as saying, "I see no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity" and "I intend to become as good a Buddhist as I can." What do you think Merton meant by this, and do you share his views? How is the contemplative Christian tradition similar to Buddhism, and how is it different?

Every tradition is like a vast building with countless rooms. Those who stand in a given tradition usually circulate only in a small number of these rooms and may not even be aware of whole wings of the palace they inhabit. Most Christians are not even familiar with their tradition's apophatic theology, based on the insight that everything we can say about God, even when it's true, is more false than true. That wing is joined—without a dividing wall—to a central part of what the Buddhist tradition has built. C.S. Lewis speaks of God (the Father) as “an echoless abyss of silence.” Buddhists readily understand that. Of course, Christians know this abyss also as the womb from which the eternal Word is born. It is the focus on Word that characterizes the Christian tradition, while the Buddhist one focuses on Silence. When Merton said that he wanted to become as good a Buddhist as he could, this may well have expressed his eagerness to explore the Silence dimension of Christianity.

You have said that, “We are in danger of being prisoners of time” and “we are not really present in the NOW. . . In meditation we can release that sense of time.” (*SACRED JOURNEY*, Oct. 2001) What is the danger of being a “prisoner of time”?

For everyday purposes, it makes sense to refer to past and future and use time wisely. Our true Self, however, is not in time. To exist means literally to stick out. As humans, we stick out, as it were, from the realm of time into the eternal Now (and eternity is, of course, not a long, long time but “the Now that does not pass away,” as St. Augustine put it). Our Big Mind lives in

the Now. Our little mind, our little ego, moves in time. The more we identify with that little ego, the more we get caught up in time. We are in danger of getting so preoccupied with our little life story and its past and future that we become estranged from the Now, can no longer step back into it, and so live as prisoners of time. Of course, there always remains the opportunity to insert moments of silent Presence into our day. And even where we find ourselves completely caught up in the rat race, just to look that fact straight in the face means that the Watcher, our Big Mind, is alive. And the more often we practice becoming aware of this, the more we shift the center of our gravity from the little mind in time to the Big Mind in the Now, where we are truly at home and at peace.

In 1995 you told Mary Ford-Grabowsky that we can try to make room for just ten minutes a day for prayer (*SACRED JOURNEY*, June, 1995). Thomas Merton wrote: "We must slow down to a human tempo, and we'll begin to have time to listen. The trouble is, we aren't taking the time to do so." As the world and our culture have sped up more than ever, what are your thoughts on this now?

Ten minutes in the mid-1990s should be worth at least ten seconds now, and that will be better than nothing! It might give you a taste for making those moments of stillness longer and longer. We should have great compassion with those who feel they truly cannot carve out time because life is so pressured, and with ourselves if we happen to be in that situation. Sometimes the simplest reminders—a sacred statue on

a windowsill above the kitchen sink, a tape of chants playing in the background, words of wisdom placed on our desk—can help keep us focused and create, even in the midst of chaos, peace.

You’ve written: “We all want security at any price. In times of fear this becomes particularly strong. This is when people turn to spiritual teachers, and they’ll become dependent on the teachers. And that’s dangerous. A true spiritual teacher doesn’t allow students to become dependent, but encourages them to come to their own power.” (“A Revolution of Authority,” wie.org) With the current escalating levels of violence worldwide and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the fear level is higher than ever. Are we at serious risk now of blindly following inauthentic teachers and leaders?

In my perspective, it seems that out of fear, more and more people are flocking to teachings not because they have examined them and found them to be true but because they give them something firm to hold on to. It is said that a person falling off a cliff will—out of a similar need—hang on to one hand with the other. Fortunately, we see at the same time that there are also a growing number of people who overcome their fear by finding a firm grounding in the Now. This gives me hope, for when we are truly still, truly present, a cosmic wisdom can flow through us. And in this wisdom lies a holy hope for peace.

Please turn the page to read an article, written by Brother David, that complements his interview.

The following article by Brother David further discusses his choice of life as a monk, and why this choice supercedes that of being a Christian. You'll find a treasure trove of his articles, with this one, on his web site at www.gratefulness.org.

"Shared Spirituality: How Gratefulness Lies at the Heart of All Religious Traditions."

In the mid-1960s I had been in monastic training at Mount Saviour for about twelve years. Our prior, Father Damascus Winzen, sent me out now and then to lecture about monastic life at some university. At this time, Buddhist and Hindu monks made their appearance in the United States. Since monasticism was my topic, intellectual honesty demanded that I inquire into what we had in common with monks of other traditions. I started by reading D.T. Suzuki's *The Training of a Zen Buddhist Monk*, and was amazed. Down to small details of daily living, the similarities to our own monastic lifestyle were striking. Mindfulness was the goal in both traditions.

Friends to whom I spoke of my astonishing discovery put me in touch with Tai-san (now Eido Shimano Roshi), a young Japanese Zen monk who had recently arrived in New York. We met. In less than three minutes we knew that we were brothers. The cultural and religious differences were vast, yet we had more in common with each other than each of us had with non-monastics of our own tradition. Tai-san invited me to come and spend time at his newly-established zendo in New York City. My prior and community wanted to meet him first. He came to Mount Saviour for a few days. The monks asked him theological questions. Tai-san and my brothers continually talked past each other, unable to find any

common ground in the realm of concepts. He left. I thought the project had failed. But all the brothers agreed: "We didn't understand what he said, but the way he walks and sits and eats proves that he is a monk." Two weeks later I sat in Tai-san's zendo.

Beginning with this first encounter, my understanding of the spiritual life shifted. I had become a monk because I wanted to be not just a run-of-the-mill Christian who followed only the commandments, but one who followed even the evangelical counsels. Now I realized that one is, so to speak, first a human being, then a monk, and only then a Christian, a Buddhist, or whatever. Monastic life is, for certain people, their way of being human. A monastic vocation constitutes a deeper stratum of one's spiritual being than one's religious persuasion. I came to see that we recognize the evangelical counsels in the Gospels only because we recognize them first in the monastic make-up of our psyche; we read them into the Gospels as much as we find them there.

If I, with my particular psychological make-up, am to become the human being I can be at my best, it will be as a monk—a Christian monk, if I live in a Christian environment, a Buddhist monk, if I live in a Buddhist one. Through every encounter with monks of other traditions—and I was privileged to have many—my experience reinforced this insight. This had two effects: It made me strive to become an authentic human being (as a monk) with the help of my Christian tradition, and it gave me a deeper sense of solidarity with all those who are striving for the same goal with the help of other traditions. It saved me from the trap of trying to become a good Christian at the expense of being fully

human, and I never joined the competition and enmity between those who identify themselves primarily by their religious labels.

The one-word answer is gratefulness—not, however, as a mere concept, but as a practice, the practice of grateful living. This integral practice is at the heart of our own tradition—Eucharist=Thanksgiving—and at the heart of all other religions. It comes as close as we can come to that Religion that finds its expression in all of the different religions. Grateful living is Trinitarian mysticism-in-action. It unites us in depth with our partners in interreligious dialogue, but what it does for us as Christians is even more important. Receiving ourselves mindfully, moment by moment, as gift flowing from the depth of the ultimate Giver, and giving all we are back in thanksgiving, makes us realize that we are immersed in the life of the Blessed Trinity. What characterizes our moment in history is the collapse of Christian theism. Gratefulness mysticism makes us realize that Christianity never was theistic, but panentheistic. Faith in God as triune implied this from the very beginning; now we are becoming aware of it. It becomes obvious, at the same time, that we share this Trinitarian experience of divine life with all human beings as a spiritual undercurrent in all religions, an undercurrent older and more powerful than the various doctrines. At the core of interreligious dialogue flows this shared spirituality of gratefulness, a spirituality strong enough to restore unity to our broken world.

This essay first appeared in the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin (issue 70, page 46) in March 2003.



Peter J. McInerney

I L L U M I N A T I O N S



In the midst of movement and chaos, keep stillness inside of you.

~ *Deepak Chopra*

The truth you believe and cling to makes you unavailable to hear anything new.

~ *Pema Chödrön*

Love is what we are born with. Fear is what we have learned here. The spiritual journey is the unlearning of fear and the acceptance of love back into our hearts.

~ *Marianne Williamson*

The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, not to worry about the future, and not to anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly.

~ *Buddha*

To complain is always non-acceptance of what is. It invariably carries an unconscious negative charge. When you complain, you make yourself a victim. Leave the situation or accept it. All else is madness.

~ *Eckhart Tolle*

At any moment you have a choice that either leads you closer to your spirit or further away from it.

~ *Thich Nhat Hanh*

To undertake a genuine spiritual path is not to avoid difficulties but to learn the art of making mistakes wakefully, to bring them to the transformative power of our heart.

~ *Jack Kornfield*

The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.

~ *Thomas Merton*

I don't know Who—or what—put the question. I don't even know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

~ *Dag Hammarskjöld*

What is to give light must endure burning.

~ *Viktor Frankl*

I could be whatever I wanted to be if I trusted that music, that song, that vibration of God that was inside of me.

~ *Shirley MacLaine*

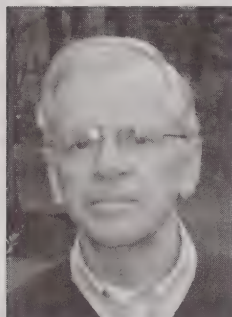
Wanting to reform the world without discovering one's true self is like trying to cover the world with leather to avoid the pain of walking on stones and thorns. It is much simpler to wear shoes.

~ *Ramana Maharshi*



An Awakening

Robert Curry



The overnight snow was light and fluffy, a soft white coat covering the fields and lawns, a mantle on the pine boughs and bare tree branches, melting quickly on the roads' dark surfaces. It was a snow typical of early spring in my part of the country. Morning came with vividly blue skies, bright sunshine, and the fresh, moist smells of the earth. All this drew me outdoors to a walk along a nearby country road.

Usually I walk briskly. "As we age," my doctor suggests, "we have to keep moving, keep the muscles and bones strong, the cardiovascular system in good trim." I try to follow her advice.

I find that walking also helps keep my mind in trim. As I walk, I seem to think more clearly. My walks are usually a good time to ponder some of the more complex questions that confront my life. On this day, however, an even more profound benefit to my walking emerged.

Robert Curry retired from a career in leadership and organization development and, since then, devotes more and more of his time and energy to seeking a greater awareness and understanding of God's presence in other people, in the world around him, and in himself. He lives north of Boston and is actively involved in a small Catholic intentional community in that area.

Pounding along the road, deep in thought, this time about an issue in our church community, I looked up. I noticed again the beauty of the blue sky; and now, I also noticed the deep green of the pine branches framed within it. I scanned the field beyond the trees and was struck by the sight of those tufts of last season's grass, too high to be covered by last night's snow, shining like burnished gold in the bright sunlight. I stopped thinking about things outside the moment.

Thoughts of thanksgiving and blessing entered my mind. Some feelings of guilt emerged as well, about having ignored the beauty of what lay in front of me, about not expressing my thanks to God for being able to walk, for being privileged to be in this place at this time. So, in my mind, and then aloud, I said, "Thank you, God," and thought that I had done what I had needed to do and could go back to exercising and thinking about the subject at hand. But it didn't work out that way.

My "thank you" didn't feel complete enough, and I could not get beyond the impact of what I was experiencing in the bright world around me. There was more to this than simply thanking God for the sky and the trees and the fields and letting it go at that.

I began reflecting on the mystery at hand, the trees that had been growing for generations, which, in turn, were the children of trees that stretched back through countless other generations, through millions of years. I reflected on the ancient soul that nurtures all the life that stretched out before me, that nurtures me. And the sky! The sky drew me back to times beyond my understanding, times of stellar explosions and an earth that would form and change again and again to a point

where it would hold this blue cover in its embrace. I had thanked God and entered a mystery.

In these moments, which became more and more joyful and wonderful as I walked along, I noticed myself not as a walker or a thinker or even as someone who relates to God in simple ways of prayer, but as a transient being within this mystery, the mystery of a God who spans all time, who has chosen to include the short span of my earthly life within his providential and beautiful creation, who, as a blessing on top of countless blessings, chose to wake me up.



Robert Kohlhuber

P O E T R Y



Mostly Sunny, Highs in the Mid-30s

Bill Sloane

This, now, is paradise.
Sitting, stretched on a dam in winter,
Embraced by a cold wind, a friend.
Five black crows, five powers, given flight:
As they disappear,
They mark the crystal blue sky
With distinction,
With disappearing calligraphic patterns,
Like invisible ink.
I went there looking for an Eagle,
Rumored to grace the lake.
Instead I was washed over by
Waves of the shimmering Sun
That glided in golden pools of pulsing light
Over the mirror of the lake.
The pools of light were an entreaty,
A greeting.
Sun, lake, wind, earth, sky—

Bill Sloane was born and raised in New Jersey. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is now obtaining social studies teaching certification in a New Jersey graduate school program. He has practiced several spiritual traditions. Writing poetry recently became a passion and a saving grace.

What more?
Knowing that the stars beyond are
Just a breath away, here, now: inhale.
The color blue that is the daylight sky
Is no longer a veil but a diurnal ornament
For this jeweled and dazzled place.
The Sun is here, now.
We are filaments for the Sun.

Divine Light

Rachel Haag

Prism pointing
light in all directions . . .
Casting crystalline colors of
many shades and hues . . .
Dances brilliantly,
Retreats softly,
Returns just as vibrant as before,
God glances, through the soul, upon the world.

Rachel Haag is a junior at The Pennington School in New Jersey where she is a student athlete, class officer, student ambassador, member of the National Honor Society and Youth Service Fellowship. Her work has been published in her school's literary magazine and she enjoys writing as an expression of her creative side.

St. Maria at Visby

Jonathan K. Rice

Winds off the Baltic
blow through cracks
of the medieval wall

as church bells ring
beyond the old apothecary

I make my way
through narrow streets
below homes on arches

past the limestone houses
of ancient merchants

The call to Mass
begs my crooked knees
sanctifies loss of cartilage
and bone before the altar

Jonathan K. Rice edits and publishes Iodine Poetry Journal. He is a Lutheran with a B.A. in Religious Studies. He has a new collection of poetry, Ukulele and Other Poems, published by Main Street Rag.

Maybe Today

John Wolf

Alone at night in a winter
that will not slacken its grip
on the throat of spring.

Tea with milk and sugar,
then a prayer.
No better companions in any season.

Touching my forehead to the floor,
the heart follows easily.
What else can we do
but bow to the god of maybes.

Maybe today the dark will yield.
Maybe the night will shine.
Maybe the silent dawn will speak.
Maybe release is near.

Of all the longings, maybe just this:

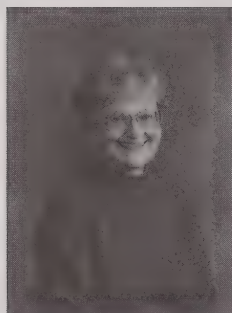
Maybe the door of grace will open.
Maybe a face will look this way.

John Wolf is a freelance writer living in the Chicago area. He holds a B.A. in Religious Studies from the University of Virginia. His poetry has been widely published in spiritual and interfaith journals.



Reflections in a Night Sky

Beverly Saylor



Autumn hovers around the night's edges as I sit on my patio, listening to the quiet murmur of a city settling into repose. Faint rustles of trees become more pronounced against a backdrop of silence. Stillness takes on a sound of its own, magnified by the absence of daily life. A moonlit sky of vivid cloud formations comforts me like a familiar old sweatshirt, so I draw it around me snugly.

When I left the conventional working world at mid-life to follow my writing dream, everything shifted. With no demands from employers, I suddenly had the luxury to schedule my own time. In a childish tug-of-war, the left brain set the alarm clock for a 7:00 a.m. networking meeting. The right brain turned it off for extra hours of sleep. This disunity exhausted me, yet it seemed a necessary part of my transition.

For the first time in my adult life, I was a caged bird free to fly. On gusty days, I covered miles and miles—not to hurry, but to see where the wind took me. I soared in endless enthusiasm, never refueling or questioning

*Beverly Saylor left a Defense Department career to follow her writing dream full-time. Although her cloud-watching is in Colorado, her Iowa roots often show through in her writing. She has been published in *Mature Years*, *Mature Living*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Grit*, and a variety of Christian periodicals.*

bearings. On calm days I hovered like a helicopter over its landing pad, not going anywhere, but still focused on my landing place. As time passed, I simply sat on the ground pondering which direction to go. It seemed pointless to flutter my wings simply because I could. I wanted a specific destination, a flight plan.

After many months, I began to judge those blocks of time as non-productive. My calendar filled with people and activities, and at night I wrote. Yet, in between were pieces of days that didn't quite fit on either end. Was I utilizing my time well?

I discussed this concern with friends. A writer friend said she'd lost momentum for her book in progress. Although not happy with the inertia, she accepted it as a necessary intermission and shifted gears. She turned to a love of gardening and brought neglected lawns back to life as a replenishment of herself.

Another friend felt pulled between her teen-agers, parents, job, and taking care of herself as a single mother. Her in-between pieces were snatched between activities, an hour here, fifteen minutes there. How could she prioritize and have time to replenish herself? She simply savored moments.

Gradually, I've come to see my in-between places as precious time to explore myself, my own truths. In the self-doubt of disconnected hours, I pray and meditate. It isn't easy, looking beneath the surface. No longer is there an escape if I stand in my own shadow. I am a 5,000 piece jigsaw puzzle that God is fitting together. I get excited when a piece fits, as if I did it all by myself. When I try to force-fit pieces, I lose sight of the big picture. We are conditioned to go, go, go—never just be. Can I step back and look at the outline of the puzzle?

Yes. The sky goes here, the mountains over there.

In-between places teach me patience in the growth process. When I feel confused, I remember it's time to go within. Maybe I don't have to attach each dislocated hour to a productive slice of the day.

On the Iowa farm of my youth, we marked transitions by winter tracks of ring-necked pheasants or lines of Canadian geese laced across the sky like crooked buttonholes. One day would be so thoroughly spring, there could be no turning back. Then, overnight, a surprise snowfall appeared, one last blanketing of corn-field stubble. Those were days of confusion, a vacillation between seasons.

It would seem, then, that in-between pieces belong as a natural part of the whole. Every life cycle includes places of doubt and uncertainty. Nothing is black and white. The rich in-between grays give life depth and meaning. Perhaps I can be gentler with them now. Instead of questioning them, I'll honor them—unique, undecided whether they want to fit at all. They represent flexibility, the deep-breathing spaces I can grow into with time.



Steve Geer



Rediscovering Who We Really Are with the Persian Sufi Poets

David Fideler



Many people love to quote great lines from the poet Jalaluddin Rumi, and many know the surprising fact that the thirteenth-century poet is the bestselling poet in America. But despite Rumi's popularity—or perhaps because of it—it's easy to overlook the fact that Rumi is part of a wider tradition of Sufi poetry, in which poets used their writings to communicate spiritual teachings and inner truths.

Today we often think of poetry as a form of self-expression, so it might seem strange to learn that the Sufis used it to communicate a shared body of teachings in an often-rigorous way. But the idea that poetry is well suited to communicating a deeper vision of life is not surprising at all. Poetry, rooted in rhythm, tone, and harmony, has always been favored as a way of speaking in deeper ways. Our actual experience of the world is

David Fideler, with his wife Sabrineh, is the translator of Love's Alchemy: Poems from the Sufi Tradition, published by New World Library. In addition to making translations, David and Sabrineh perform Sufi poetry in Persian and English with musical accompaniment. Their website is located at www.sufipoetry.com.

not dry, abstract, and linear; in many cases, music and poetry can capture living experience with far greater immediacy and resonance than some type of academic lecture.

According to the Sufis, our original self is fully open to the beauty and depths of creation; it exists in a natural state of harmony with the divine. As we mature and the ego crystallizes, we gain an important sense of self, but something else is lost at the same time. As we grow up, we become conditioned and trained by our parents, schools, and social institutions to behave and respond in certain types of ways. There is nothing wrong with that—in fact, it's essential, since we all need to become part of the social fabric. The real problem occurs when the ego starts responding to others and to life's situations in ways that are automatic, compulsive, and even obsessive. When this happens, we identify with an artificially constructed or false self, losing the sense of our original, deeper nature. In the end, much of the work of spiritual growth that everyone faces involves a balancing act: finding a way to reconcile the demands of our inner, essential nature with the outer demands of human society.

Sufism, like other spiritual traditions, gives us methods and tools to catch a deeper glimpse of who we are and one of these tools is poetry. While some Sufi poems are beautiful expressions of devotion and longing, and others are teaching works, the most remarkable works—at least for me—are the genuinely mystic poems that transport the reader into another way of seeing. By using an element of surprise, the mystic poems can subtly short-circuit our habitual perceptions and expectations. The impact they carry

can nudge the conditioned self out of its ingrained ways of seeing the world, at least for a moment, and offer a living sense of reality's deeper, spiritual dimension, which the conscious mind often filters out. Such a sense of depth and mystery is conveyed by the poem "Invisible Caravans," which is only four lines in the original Persian:

Love's concert is calling,
but the flute can't be seen.

The drunks are in sight,
but the wine can't be seen.

Hundreds
of caravans
have passed
this very way—

Don't be surprised
if their trace can't be seen.

Many of the best mystic poems convey an almost overwhelming sense that there is a deeper, timeless dimension that is just on the very edge of human perception—and only slightly out of reach. If we can change the way we look at things just a tiny bit, this deeper dimension of life suddenly comes into focus. In this way, a poem like "Invisible Caravans" might lead us to tangibly experience the timeless sense of formlessness at the heart of reality; another might lead us to look at our own, self-limiting behavior from an angle in which the sometimes-petty scripts we act out

become readily obvious; and a third poem might lead us to see the world as a living mirror of divine energies, rather than just a collection of static objects. Depending upon the poem, all of these perceptions and more are actively evoked by the Sufi writers.

The Sufi emphasis on love also takes the reader outside of the habitual, conditioned self, to experience the depths of the world and human nature in a more tangible and profound way. The remarkable thing about love is that it leads us to go beyond our own selves and value another person more highly than any other “thing” in the world. For better or worse, in true love, one is no longer in control; the ego or personal self surrenders to another. The importance of the “I” melts away, no longer acting as the central focus of self-concern.

In the experience of love, the Sufi poets discovered an opening in which they and their readers could most deeply taste the kind of selflessness that is the goal of the mystic—the goal of the spiritually mature human being. As one poet wrote, “when I went beyond myself, the pathway finally opened.” As another writes, “that which frees you from your tiny self is love.” The Sufis sought a level of intimacy with God—the Beloved—that only the language of love is capable of capturing. Rather than worshipping a God who is a distant idea or abstraction, for the Sufi, a sustained, intimate relationship with the divine is possible:

The distance
to the Beloved
is only one step—

Why not, then,
take that step?

Another poet, 'Abd al-Wasi' Jabali, celebrates the freedom from the false self that genuine love can inspire:

My head was full, overflowing with conceit—

I was staggering, drunk—
wasted on the wine
of my imagined greatness.

But your love made me low—
it brought humility.

It made me free
from having
to worship
myself.

Above all, the Sufi poets celebrate a central paradox of human nature: when, in the end, we go beyond the self, we discover a deeper vision of who and what we really are. In what first seems like emptiness or even ruin, there is an unexpected depth of experience; in the experience of loss and sacrifice, freedom and gain may be found.

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Archway of Hope

Susan Gregg-Schroeder



It was a dark night, whose stillness was suddenly broken with the sound of air-raid sirens. People dropped what they were doing and hurried to the safety of bomb shelters. Here they stayed, huddled together in fear, for eleven long hours of concentrated aerial bombardment.

Here they stayed, wondering what would be left of the city they called home.

We've seen it on the news. We've read it in the papers. We've lived it in our hearts. But this was not today's news, although it could have been. The date was November 14, 1940, and the place was the city of Coventry in England.

It was a typical city where men and women lived and worked and where families grew up. It was a city with a proud heritage and history. It was also a city that manufactured munitions, and it was the city that Hitler chose to use as an example at the beginning of World War II.

Susan Gregg-Schroeder is coordinator of Mental Health Ministries for the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church, and author of In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression. Please visit her online at www.mentalhealthministries.net.

When the people emerged from their bomb shelters the next day, they found their city had been devastated. The bombing had been so concentrated that water pipes had burst, so residents were unable to put out the fires that ravaged their city. Emergency vehicles could not make it through the streets because of the deep craters left by the bombs; and there were hundreds of dead and injured.

The city's beloved Cathedral had received a direct hit. The roof had caught fire and crashed into the nave of the church. The stained glass windows had been blown out. Walking through the ruins, a worker found a few roof timbers that had fallen in the shape of a cross. He lashed the two charred pieces of wood together, and the healing began.

A few days later, a Coventry priest picked up three of the large medieval roof nails from the rubble. He had them welded together and silver-plated in the form of a cross, which was presented to the Provost of the cathedral. The Provost recognized that these crosses symbolized a new ministry for Coventry Cathedral—a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. Some weeks after the raid, the Provost delivered a message on the BBC. He spoke these words from the gutted shell of the once-grand cathedral. "We are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge. We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler, a more Christlike sort of world, in the days beyond this strife."

Thus began the rebuilding of a new cathedral, right next to the bombed-out ruins. I had the privilege of visiting Coventry Cathedral in 1991 as we were engaged in the Gulf War. What a powerful moment it was for me to stand in the archway between the bombed-out shell

and the glorious new Cathedral. Standing in that archway, I knew that I was standing in that sacred space between Good Friday and Easter. The new cathedral, splendid in its magnificence and beauty, became a symbol of recovery and hope for the future, but only because it was connected by that archway to the death and destruction from which it had sprung.

P R A Y E R S



Prayer in Winter

Jampa Napthali Williams

Speak of the winter, of the darkness,
of the cold,
but speak of them with love.
God is nestled in the tree roots
and in the trees' companions,
in the fur and limbs of squirrels
rushing in the slanting light
to find their daily portion.
God sings from
the passionate calls of birds,
whose wings moderate
the bitterest winds.
From year to year the smallest thrive
and fly from season to season
Come, see our good fortune.
Each soul a luminous being
beloved of God.

Jampa Napthali Williams is a flawed yet ever-hopeful person who believes that God fashioned all beings with love, and thus, that He longs for us to love all of His creation. She cares tenderly for every creature, for each is fashioned from God's tender devotion.

Gratefully Yours

John Welwood

Just to have eyes,
That I may see the colors
Of your luminous presence everywhere,
For this alone, I give thanks.

Just to have ears,
That I may hear the music
Of your sonorous silence,
For this alone, I am grateful.

Just to have speech,
That I may give voice
To all the subtle shadings
Of how it is, being here,
For this alone, I offer praise.

Just to inhabit this human body,
That I may know you in my blood
And in my bones,
For this alone, I am your servant.

Just to be here,
Just for this time,
However long it lasts,
For this alone, I bow down.

John Welwood is a clinical psychologist and pioneer in the work of integrating Eastern spiritual teachings with Western therapeutic practices. He calls his work "psychological work in a spiritual context." Visit him online at www.johnwelwood.com. From Poems of Love and Awakening © John Welwood, Ph.D., 2004.



Birth or Death

Danny Martin



I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different.

~ T.S. Eliot

I've just returned from Ireland where I sat with my dear Aunt Marian, as she moved through her dying process, though what I witnessed was as much about being born as dying. Clearly, they are related; two sides of the same thing, perhaps.

That, certainly, was my experience, as I sat by her bed, watching this woman move through the stages of her dying—from struggle to calm, and from fear to acceptance—until she seemed to emerge as something new, someone re-born. The paradox was reflected on her face: on one side there was a person dying, disappearing, almost, before our eyes; on the other side was a bright, almost glowing, profile of someone ageless.

Danny Martin is a native of Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is Founder and President of Cross River Connections (CRC), which offers training and consulting in the field of personal, organizational, and social change through the art of Dialogue, which he defines as skilled interaction for creative outcomes. He is also founder and director of International Communities for the Renewal of the Earth (ICRE), a not-for-profit organization that fosters an ecological spirituality as the basis for a more creative and sustainable society. Recently his focus has turned to writing and (back) to the world of retreats as a way of moving into the next stage of his journey. He lives in Cross River, NY with his wife, Ann D'Elia.

Eternal? Birth and death together, the way they always are in life: each one needing the other, in a sense; each one having to happen for the other to appear.

The night I left to be with her I had opened a little book of writings and read the piece offered for that day:

Held in the arms of darkness, bathed in moonlight; I have lived my whole life for these moments; a woman, silent, waiting, receptive. This is the work of my soul.

It made me think of how afraid of death she always was, and then, in these last months, of the darkness that probably reminded her of its advent. We had an unwritten agreement that I would be there to help her when her time came, and she would always remind me whenever I came to visit. Appropriately enough it was the first night of the full moon.

What I found was a woman, held now in the arms of darkness, doing her soul work. For, in those moments—five days, in fact—it seemed indeed like she was going over her whole life, behind her Janus-like face, as she lay silent, waiting and—to judge by her changing face and her deepening quietness—increasingly receptive.

The whole experience felt like this time of the year when life is stirring in the depths of the dark earth: new life being born out of the old. Soul work, indeed: birth through death. It made me realize that now is the time for us all to be doing soul work, when our world feels shrouded in darkness and frightened about what may be ahead.

As we move toward another Spring, I pray that we can face the things of our lives that come up before us everywhere in these dark days, and birth new life out of this apparent death.

BOOK REVIEWS



A BOOK OF HOURS

by Thomas Merton

Edited by Kathleen Deignan

Sorin Books, 2007

Phone: 800-282-1865

Web site: www.avemariapress.com

"Plagued by the same questions and afflictions that torment people of our time, Thomas Merton lived deeply into a "different wisdom" of the healing, illuminating, and transformative Christian mysteries. His passion was to share this wisdom with those of us beyond the monastic enclosure. Not that he found answers, but he had discerned a way to plumb the more radical questions that have engaged spiritual seekers from the beginning of time."

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was an acclaimed Catholic theologian, monk, poet, author, and social activist. He is considered one of the most influential spiritual masters of the twentieth century and he remains a spiritual guide for believers around the world. He is perhaps best known for his spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Now, for the first time, some of his most lyrical and prayerful writings have been arranged into *A Book of Hours*, organized entirely as a source for prayer and contemplation.

Editor Kathleen Deignan has arranged prayers for

Dawn, Day, Dusk, and Dark for each of the days of the week, creating a rich resource for daily prayer that imitates the increasingly popular ancient monastic practice of “praying the hours.”

In the tradition of the monks who richly illustrated the traditional *Book of Hours*, American artist John Giuliani has illustrated this version of *A Book of Hours*. Focused on the theme of Merton’s awareness of time, the art adds a visual elegance to the work. Jim Finley, author and friend of Merton, has contributed a moving forward to *A Book of Hours*. This book is a treasure for Merton enthusiasts and sought as a rich, lively source of prayer for contemporary believers.

Kathleen Deignan is an educator, theologian, and composer. Deignan has written numerous articles in the area of classical and contemporary spirituality, particularly on the legacy of Thomas Merton. She is also the editor of *When the Trees Say Nothing*, a collection of Merton’s writings on nature.

STANDING STILL:

Hearing the Call to a Spirit-Centered Life

by Meredith Jordan

Rogers McKay Publishing, September 2006

Phone: 207-283-0752

Web site: www.rogersmckay.org

“Standing still is an art, an active spiritual practice, and—at the best of times—a way of life. It has little to do with being passive or doing nothing. Standing still is a pause in the breathless pace of life. It is a time to reflect and evaluate whatever’s unfolding in the moment just in front of us. It’s an opportunity to savor that moment to

the full and to live into it with all the zip and gusto we can gather from our interior wellspring."

We live in a culture that functions at a furious pace and lures us, little by little, into placing our attention outward instead of turning inward where the still, quiet voice of Mystery speaks in tones so hushed we fail to notice unless we are standing still. The over-busy world in which we live is not user-friendly to those of us who choose to live consciously centered in Spirit.

Following the inspirational and thought-provoking path of her first book, *Embracing the Mystery*, Jordan continues to pursue and examine the many complex and fruitful aspects of the spiritual journey. In *Standing Still: Hearing the Call to a Spirit-Centered Life*, she probes those times when we are challenged by life events—occasionally even forced—to stop everything, wait for our next instructions, and listen quietly as those next steps are made clear. Masterfully weaving spiritual wisdom into the stories of seekers in their everyday lives, Jordan teaches that the Source of All Life is continually generating new opportunities for us to expand and mature spiritually, if we only see that these opportunities most often arrive "disguised as our lives."

For more than twenty-five years, Meredith Jordan has worked with adults and children embarked on a spiritual journey to develop or deepen a personal relationship with the Mystery many people call God. She is a licensed clinical professional counselor, interfaith spiritual director, and co-founder of Rogers McKay, a non-profit, interfaith, spiritual educational organization based in southern coastal Maine.



Louise A. Hutner

E N D P I E C E



Grief and Praise

Ann O'Shaughnessy

Recently I listened to a recording of Martin Prechtel speaking on "Grief and Praise." In it he explains the connections between grief and praise, grief and joy, grief and love. They all require the same muscle—the heart—to be supple and open. To restrict the expression of grief is to hobble the heart in its expression of joy, praise, and love. He says that those who do not know how to grieve well do not know how to praise well. And praise, the heartfelt expression of gratitude for the gift of life, is our daily bread.

When I was a little girl, I used to imagine something sad just so I could cry. I liked how I felt afterwards, open and clear. Everything looked more beautiful after a good cry. Growing older, I noted others' discomfort with tears and learned to hold them back. Now in my 40th year, tears come easily. Watching a bobwhite belt out its wild, piercing cry this week brought tears rolling down my cheeks—joy mixed with grief mixed with love.

Ann O'Shaughnessy is a freelance writer, editor, speaker, and workshop leader. She worked as a writer and editor for Heron Dance for six years, a non-profit organization which, through its web site and publication of the same name, "seeks to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of people trying to live compassionate, harmonious, interesting lives." Ann recently started her own non-profit organization, Soul Flares, "dedicated to providing the inspiration and support needed to live a soulful life in harmony with nature and all beings, through workshops, biweekly e-newsletters, an online community, and local Vermont gatherings. For more information please visit www.soulflares.org and www.herondance.org.

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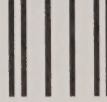
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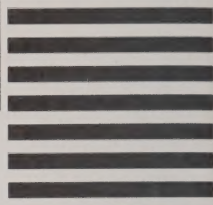
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